Living and listening: the environmental vision in Avison's final collection

by Katherine M. Quinsey

> Let stillness gather down at last,
> then,
> steeped in the oceanic
> peacefulness of
> greens, of leafiness,
> of living and
> listening.
> ("Life?", *Listening* 53)

Environmentalism in Margaret Avison's poetry is not simply a theme, a metaphor, or an "ism": it is an encompassing and enlivening principle, one that transcends the boundaries of contemporary definitions of the term.[1] If an ecological approach is defined as one that challenges human-centred interpretations of the cosmos; that recognizes the nonhuman creation as having its own significance separate from human definition, and its own narrative separate from human symbolism; that entails both humility and responsibility towards the nonhuman environment,[2] then Avison's work not only embodies ecological perspectives, it expands them. Avison's poetry has long been associated with the breaking down of conventional categories and constructed boundaries of perception, and with them a human-centred perspective. The early poem "Perspective" (*AN* 1.31-2) parodies the mock-physics of the vanishing point, a hallmark of Western individual subjective focus (the "eye/I" of modernity); such well-known early poems as "Snow" ("The optic heart must venture: a jail-break / And re-creation," *AN* 1.69) enact the eye's "opening-out" ("The Bible To Be Believed," *AN* 2.63). This challenge to constructed perception entails a deeper ontological challenge, as Avison's work breaks down conventional categories not only of vision, but also of being; it opens up and blurs distinctions between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, trivial and general, individual and universal, human and nonhuman, domestic and cosmic. Her work joyfully loosens the boundaries between metaphoric and literal, tenor and vehicle, confessional and impersonal: "My heart

branches, / swells into bud and spray: / heart break" ("March Morning," *AN* 2.30). Through this radically wide-ranging and fundamentally ecological perspective, Avison's poems are also woven through by more directly environmental themes: the recurring celebration of a separate and sentient nonhuman environment; reciprocal encounters with the nonhuman Other; images of the cosmos as both cozy domestic "home" and dizzying universe beyond human imagining.

Avison's work exemplifies the dissolving poetic subjectivity of post-Romantic and modernist environmentally-oriented poetry,[3] but her representation of this phenomenon is direct and dynamic, as both poet and environment become centres of subjective perception and felt experience: "I have seen the valley trees / receive Your / bud-breaking, slowly savour / golden-green life" ("Foretaste, Canadian," *Listening* 17). In this example the act of "savour[ing] golden-green life," an act of tasting and sensing, belongs syntactically to the trees but is shared by both trees and poet "I," who savours it by association, in the act of imaginative receptivity. While Avison's work meets today's definition of an ecologically-oriented worldview and poetics, most ecological formulae are essentially political in purpose, and thus human-centred in their focus. Avison's work encompasses the political in her commitment to social and ecological justice, and to the transformed vision it requires, but her work is more radically experiential, challenging the boundaries of the self and extending felt experience to that which is beyond our knowledge. Her poetry pushes contemporary ecocritical models beyond their limitations into an ecological vision encompassing both human and nonhuman, domestic and alien—it is at times excoriating, consistently unsettling, and both individually and cosmically redemptive.

Avison's work also complicates existing ecocritical distinctions between urban and rural, natural and constructed. While "urban ecology" has been a recognized genre within ecocritical discourse since its inception, much ecocritical theory remains founded on essentialized (and often gendered) divisions between urban and rural, constructed and natural, human and nonhuman; in more recent work on urban ecology, natural forces in the city are either applied metaphorically to the human community as its own ecosystem, or portrayed as a human-focused duality. This can be seen, for example, in Michael Height's distinction between "pedigreed landscape" (human-controlled and devised) and wild nature or "fortuitous landscape", reclaimed by nature, e.g. weeds and post-industrial wastelands.[4] Avison's work transcends this duality to focus almost entirely on natural phenomena in an urban setting. In Avison's urban environment

nonhuman nature continually acts, perceives, and speaks for itself, whether it is a dog in a "(peopleless) park," "Toronto trees," or weeds growing through the concrete; the theme was significant enough to Avison that she made it the title of her Griffin-award-winning collection *Concrete and Wild Carrot* in 2002.[5] Indeed, one of the key poems of *Listening* contrasts the ecological variety and vitality of Toronto's greenness to the relative aridity of the rural landscape of her prairie childhood, placing the act of "breathing this forested city's / greenness" in the "context" of "a bald / cumin-dark prairie / childhood…tirelessly / windy, bone- / drying" ("Ever Greens," *Listening* 58). As Avison dissolves these oppositions, she also dissolves the conventional stances of urban poetry; neither disengaged nor subsumed, her poetic self possesses a relational and reciprocal engagement with an ever-present nonhuman world that is both in and of the city. Avison sees human communities as ecological, but not as their own systems, and not merely as referents to a natural metaphor; they are literally integrated with other nonhuman communities under the same caring "sky." This larger ecological perspective informs Avison's sense of both social and cosmic justice. And it is here specifically that Avison's environmental vision fundamentally challenges the essentially human-centred focus even of "deep ecology," in a vision that is both more charitable, more open and, ironically, less constructed.

Finally, Avison's environmental vision further differs from contemporary ecopoetics in that it is inseparable from her Christian orientation. The relationship of Christianity and ecocriticism has been discussed recently in response to a long tradition of separation stemming from Lynn White's famous essay in 1963, which placed the blame for Western exploitation of the natural world on Judaeo-Christian models of domination.[6] Burbery and others argue that Christianity and ecocriticism are fundamentally compatible on theoretical, philosophical, and political grounds, not least because they argue for both the existence and moral significance of an objective reality beyond the "text" (Burbery 192-195; Eaton *passim*). The environmental vision in Avison's poetry, however, shows a more fundamental identity between her Christianity and ecology; in her poetry, incarnational theology and the relationship between self and God are often reflected and embodied in the dynamic relationship between human and the non-human creation. The ontological blurring of her environmental vision finds its ultimate source and validation in the union of created and Uncreated.[7] Her poetic vision and ecological perspective are reflective of the central Christian paradox that you must lose yourself in order to find yourself—more specifically, that in order to be, fully, you must lose yourself in relation-

ship. Moreover, the dissolving of boundaries between self and other are also at the heart of Avison's vision of social justice.

Often in Avison's work the relationship with the nonhuman environment provides the model for and means of spiritual encounter, both metaphorically and literally; trees embody Christian patience and openness to God, as well as literally providing the experience of living and "breathing," both physical and spiritual. This is a particularly strong theme in Avison's final collection *Listening: last poems*. In "Foretaste, Canadian," both trees and poet equally "receive" and "savour" "Your / bud-breaking ... golden-green life"; in "Slow Start" (*Listening* 16), the non-human creation responds in "thanksgiving" without indication of a human presence—"Thankfulness overflows" from the dawn itself. Indeed, the poem's suggestion that the human vision itself is too weak ("None of it could be / eyed head-on"), that it must be mediated by the clouds, is both physically true of sunrise and Biblically allusive to the veil over God's glory in Exodus. Avison challenges notions of human centrality by portraying the non-human creation as sharing in religious experience, even modelling or enabling such experience for humans. Elsewhere in her poetry, original sin is specifically associated with environmental degradation brought about by humans. In an important environmental statement, "The surround signifies / when one has / one life only," whether the "surround" is Toronto's greenness, dry prairie fields, "Ant / arctica, or the / Sea of Marmara" ("Ever Greens," *Listening* 59).

This essay treats Avison's posthumously-published volume *Listening: last poems*, not only because it has received relatively little critical attention while at the same time it represents some of Avison's finest mature work, but also because it develops explicitly some of the environmental themes outlined above. Most notable is the title theme of "listening," repeated through the volume from opening to closing: the listening human self, listening trees, listening as characteristic of old age. Listening emphasizes *being* rather than action, receptiveness as opposed to "venturing"; in these poems, listening is an activity as well as a quality, one that is multi-layered and multi-personed, shared with other elements of the non-human creation. This theme shows a fundamental shift in Avison's own metaphor for poetic perception, from active sight (the "ventur[ing]" of the "optic heart") to a receptive "listening"—multisensory, synaesthetic, with an emphasis on hearing and receiving, often specific to old age. Listening is also more closely linked to an ecologically-oriented sense of equality, as the act of listening is conceptually less invasive and more relational than

seeing or observing; it requires openness, receptivity, immersion, even, in the environment.

Nonhuman nature is both literally and metaphorically the backbone of this volume, as both metaphor and vehicle for an intimate and receptive relationship with God, as possible "release" or "solution" for the deepest human problems, and as the embodiment of art, poetry, old age, and life itself. This is supported by the organization of the collection through the seasons of a year from March to January, in both the classic metaphor for human life and also, literally, the annual cycle of life of the natural environment. The collection also challenges and transcends notions of time, however, as the theme of alpha and omega, of Genesis and Apocalypse, beginning and ending, runs through both individual poems and the volume's organization; it culminates in the theme of "foreverness," where linear and non-linear time are brought together.

My focus will be primarily on the representation of environment and, with it, of both poetic and nonhuman subjectivity; on the idea of "listening" as fundamental to ecological relationship, both with God and with the nonhuman other; finally, on the role of the nonhuman environment in the context of human society and human responsibility, and that which transcends them. The essay will conclude with consideration of one of Avison's tree poems, "Soundings" (*Listening* 70-71), which links nature, art, and poet—"Toronto trees," art, and old age—in the same experiential process, and finally with "A Sequel" (*Listening* 78), her own concluding poem, in which she wishes the writer's life could be paralleled to that of the transformative weed, the dandelion.

"Foretaste, Canadian" (*Listening* 17), which occurs early in the collection (i.e. in spring), focuses on the nature and limitation of vision, and on shared subjective experience between the human perceiver and the nonhuman environment. In the specificity of a warm day in a late Canadian April, the poet's sensation melts into imaginative identification with the sensation of nonhuman nature:

> I have seen the valley trees
> receive Your
> bud-breaking, slowly savour
> golden-green life . . .

The syntactic agents in this line are the trees, which "receive" and "savour" God's "bud-breaking" in a tree-like sensibility (feeling and tasting bud-breaking) characterized as receptiveness; their act of "savour[ing]" is shared by the human perceiver, as both humans and trees are united in the

act of “receiv[ing]” the blessing of “golden-green life” that promises “summertime’s benefice.” The felt experience of the trees helps define and create human experience; the “foreglimpse of / summertime’s benefice” is felt as

> shadows’ touch, for little
> us ‘like trees walking’ to
> receive as do the trees in
> lavish springtime’s
> early first-green im-
> pulse.

The Biblical allusion to the blind man receiving his sight (which happens in stages, as he sees people at first as “trees walking” [Matt 8.24]) emphasizes the process of gaining sight, with notions of growing perception, healing, and life, through the same power of “Your / bud-breaking” felt by the trees; it is also an image that strikingly unites people with trees, in a literal blurring of kind and genus. It is also notable that this final phrase has no active verb or predicate, that “touch” is nominative (modified by trees’ “shadows’”), and that the central verb “receive” is open-ended, intransitive, without an object; it is rather a state of being, the receptiveness of the natural world to the overflowing blessing of the Creator, to be emulated by “little” humans as they begin to gain their vision. Even the “first-green im- / pulse” is playfully broken into punning meaning, ending on the term “pulse” as of life, heartbeat; human biological life merges with that of trees in the “early first-green impulse” of spring.

Avison’s representation of non-human animals partakes of the same humility and openness to otherness of perspective. This is addressed directly in “Other” (*Listening* 62-63), which is characterized by self-awareness about the ways in which human vision categorizes and defines animals in their experience, recreating them even as dreams or fantasies and thus incorporating them in human consciousness. It opens with a contrast between the more and less alien animal world, between fish and cute mammalian beings who are probably squirrels.

> Fishes my eyes meet
> seldom. Possibly that time
> was in a
> dream.

> Little furry people among
> large tree roots, nibbling,
> from their 'hands,' upright and
> bright-eyed, remain
> friends afar.

Yet the statement "Fishes my eyes meet / seldom" emphasizes mutual meeting as well as human perception, and the watery element in which they must meet suggests that they both have to be in it together—which leads to the suggestion that the meeting itself was a dream. Squirrels, on the other hand, share not only mammalian kinship but also an urban and arboreal environment; here the description mocks anthropocentric personification while at the same time acknowledging the relationship: they aren't even named as squirrels but as "Little furry people," "upright," "bright-eyed," and "nibbling, / from their 'hands'," who "remain / friends afar." The vivid evocation of squirrels and the relationship still retains the overtones of dream or fantasy, however, as is emphasized by the introduction of the poem's main event, the experience of birds at dawn, in a specific city location: "This, though, / truly happened, in the / heart of metropolitan Toronto." Here the animal experience is not a dream or an anthropomorphic fantasy but a shared moment that lives on in memory.

The city environment is vividly evoked both through the location ("heart of metropolitan Toronto") and a description of the urban environment embodied in the tree, as "a pale / first light touched the thin branches of / the pear tree in / its small backyard." For the birds, however, this "pale / first light" acts as a "bank of footlights" suddenly switching on, to "launch…, instantly, a / whirl of little ones." While the footlights are seemingly anthropomorphic, the metaphor in fact serves to illustrate the distinction between human and bird perceptions of "first light": what is pale and subtle to humans is sudden dramatic prompting for birds. In the "whirl of little ones," a vivid physical description of birds flocking up in flight, the technical human name ("birds") is not used. Indeed, the human naming of birds is ultimately irrelevant to the birds themselves, in their own speech:

> Bird books give them
> beautiful names, and
> some peculiar ones.
> Were they
> calling to one another, or
> to themselves, that morning?

The poem calls them "little ones" without naming species, and describes their variety without technical specifics, in a language that is sensory, experiential, celebratory, and receptive: "They / twittered and piped and gurgled all / at once, each with its / colourful cravat or patch or / crest" This event is a visitation, reflecting this moment in the birds' own priorities: "They were all / breakfasting, / on their way south." The poet meanwhile sits in stillness of listening, with even conventional poetic language itself forming not on the page but from out of the experience itself:

> How still I sat! How a word formed
> itself in air so gentled:
> *zephyr* (stone-blue but soft).

The poetic term "zephyr" from classical tradition usually refers to the gentle winds of spring, but here it takes place in the fall, and the word forms itself not from the page of human tradition but from out of the air, out of the felt experience, out of the intersection of human experience and the independent life of the natural world; it is freed into its own sensory associations across sight and touch and sound ("*zephyr* (stone-blue but soft)").

For the poet this encounter lives in memory, in an act of repeated anamnesis: "They warble and / chirp, in memory / now, / again, breaking but never / shattering every first- / light's quietude." Their mutual encounter with the "other" inhabits the same moment, but hers continues in memory, and continues to inform the experience of dawn, contrasting the reality of a memorialised encounter to the anthropomorphic fantasy or dream. The poem thus explores human interpretations of animal encounters; it celebrates separateness and finds spiritual food in an almost Wordsworthian sense in remembering it.

The urban natural environment is at the core of many of the poems' representation of the challenge to the constructed self in the encounter with the nonhuman environment, and a recovery of self in relationship. "The Cloud" (*Listening* 22-3) evokes the anonymous fourteenth-century work *The Cloud of Unknowing,* a well-known manual on the act of abandoning the self in contemplative prayer to the realm of "unknowing," beyond conscious rational analysis; this is linked with a reference to the fourteenth-century hermit Richard Rolle of Hampole, whose works on Christian mysticism (*Incendium Amoris* and *Emendatio Vitae*) continue to be widely read.[8] The poem's extended metaphor centres on the urban (human) dweller, keeper of the "pedigreed landscape" of manicured lawn and hedges, and the process by which his careful borders are dissolved to encounter the "wild" beyond the hedge. In reference to *The Cloud of*

Unknowing, this can be compared to a rational analysis of God's attributes in opposition to the abandonment of self to His Presence; "unknowing" enables perception and knowledge beyond rational (constructed) knowledge, as the Cloud is "too strange / to see"—it is beyond the limitations of human perception and definition. The poem develops an analogue in the human relationship to the natural world: that which is raked and tidy behind clipped hedges, safe, controlled, defined, in contrast to the "wild' unknown that "presses" from beyond.

"The Cloud" is initially capitalized as the title of the poem, which is incorporated directly into the first line; later capitalization makes clear that this is a proper noun, suggesting the cloud of God in Exodus as well as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Moreover, the use of the title as the active subject of the first line suggests that the poem embodies in itself the process of relationship and change in perception.

> The Cloud
>
> presses in
> upon a person to that moment sure he is
> mature now, coping, in
> balance: with
> tree-shadow on his watered flower-
> borders (or trees to sketch
> their etchings on his snowdrifts).

The person who thinks he is in control, "mature," "coping," everything in "balance," is like the urban gardener with "watered flower- / borders," who possesses his landscape ("his…flower- / borders," "his snowdrifts"), which is characterized by definition and borders (note the term "flower-borders" where we would expect "flower beds"). Yet he is not solely in control, as the "tree-shadow" and the parenthetical comment "(or, trees to sketch / their etchings on his snowdrifts)" reveal that trees have their own artistry, separate from human design and designation, subtly underlined by the internal rhyme that emphasizes their own activity: "sketch / their etchings." Snowdrifts, moreover, are not normally a possession, so the "his" is amusingly ironic; "drifts" are created by wind, whereas "snowbanks" are created by tidy human shovellers.

The next verse paragraph identifies the Cloud with a Subjective Person, observing yet intimately knowledgeable, as "Eyes from behind the Cloud / see him, see through." Here being seen and seeing become one, as

> . . . Being
> seen, surprisingly
> opens his eyes to a
> feather, white and indigo, on
> a granular leaf his
> rake had not prodded away.

"…Being / seen, surprisingly" enables the opening of vision, in small details at first: to see a blue jay feather on a leaf "not prodded away" by his rake. The leaf, which in his landscaping priorities would be clutter to be raked away, is now "granular"; every minute detail, every part, is visible, created, significant. The seemingly trivial image overturns the priorities of the urban landowner, the sense of what is important and what is not; this newly liberated, minute perception of the natural world opens the way to the transformation of vision and of self in the "embrace" of the Cloud—"The Cloud embraces his / opened eyes, himself as / well." This sweeping away of constructed definitions leave him "Lost" and "without / focus awhile"; this is the point at which the specific reference to Rolle appears, as an "alerting secret" which "warbles" like a bird from the past. Rolle's four steps of mystical experience in *Incendium Amoris* lay out concrete aids for the individual, moving from "unknowing" to active imagination.

Beyond and within the vision of the natural world, the poem / process moves to intimate inner experience, as the Cloud, "too strange to / see, now," acts directly on the self; it "fingers, / takes careful prongs, unsettles / all that was fixed." This description of transformative inner experience alludes again to the suburban rake (prongs), but where the landowner's rake coarsely "prodded" leaves away, in spite of their "granular" delicacy, to achieve human-defined tidiness, order, and limitation, the Cloud's inner transformation does the opposite, as with delicate knowing precision (suggested by "fingers"), it "unsettles" and "opens out the / wild beyond his / glossy hedges." The constructed self is represented by the quintessential urban-rural image of the glossy clipped hedge: a boundary, marker, sign of division, distinction, structure and organization—in itself a clipped and controlled natural plant. The action of the Cloud, however, "unsettles / all that was fixed," overturns human preconceptions, constructions, assumptions, "fixed" points in our self-identity. The poem continues the image of the "fingers" and "delicate prongs" in the description of the ongoing encounter:

> Out of the Cloud
> (within now)

fingers, or delicate prongs,
pick out, shift, a
morsel here, a
crumb of his old
person, there.

The Biblical and mythic overtones of “Out of the cloud” shift into the ambiguous “(within now),” as the Cloud is both within the human self and acts from within Itself. The transformation (re-creation) of self through this careful knowing artistry takes place with attention to “morsel[s]” and “crumb[s]” of the old self, elements that human designation would rake away as unimportant, as in the “granular” detail of the leaf.

The final lines take up some of the central themes of this collection, as they shift from vision to listening, as the opened-out self in future may become both a “listening ear” and an instrument to be tuned and played:

Let the years
ahead (perhaps)
tune him up, his
listening ear, tune even
perhaps his knowing that
now, he can
play in.

The hanging preposition “in” with the adverb “now” breaks open conventional syntax to suggest an eternal Now, outside normal space and time restrictions. The theme of “playing” occurs throughout the collection, usually with reference to the cosmos or to the natural environment, but often in this context of time / beyond time, or the ending of the universe. It generally has a double meaning as both a transitive and intransitive verb (play music, play an instrument, *play* in all its senses of childlike freedom and joy), which is emphasized here by the seemingly incomplete syntax of the final lines (play music in a body or group? play in an environment? play “in” the eternity of time and space?). In “A Lingering Touch” (*Listening* 11), the sun plays on the now-dry buds of last year’s pussy willow in a corner inside, making the dead branches symbols of life and instruments of music, suggestive of life and eternity to come:

This morning as he
mounted towards zenith, one
shone-in shaft

played, puss by puss

slowly, up
the southmost stalk of the
pussy willows.
Why, its playing was
music,
a slow progression
towards
the final
treble salute.

In “Listening (For Grandma)” (*Listening* 3-4), the words of the grandmother and those of God may, in the poet’s old age, be “savoured” (like the life-force savoured by the trees in “Foretaste”): as the words so apparently light in her youth, “blown eastward” in the “early spring winds,” become in their lightness the “play” of living beings, within an inner tree-like self —“perhaps I will be savouring the / squirrelling words at play in / my innermost branches?”

While “The Cloud” uses the natural environment as a metaphor for the human experience of God, many if not most of Avison’s poems refer to the natural world directly and see it as sharing in the experience of divine life, and as providing a model for and an enabling of human perception of it. These poems are characterized by a dynamic blurring of the human subject and a focus on the natural environment as sentient, with poet and natural world linked together equally in the state of “listening” and receptiveness. As in Avison’s earlier work, trees are both a metaphor for divine-earthly connections and a key environmental concept. *Listening* has a cluster of tree poems organized together in late summer and fall in the volume’s chronology: “Life?” (52-53, from which this essay draws its epigraph) and “Communal Care” (72), both of which are poems of being, introducing the idea of community with the environment; “Seasonal Setbacks” (54), a humorous rhythmic account of a battle between natural pests and trees’ growth, with eschatological overtones; “Severn Creek Park” (55), which embodies the ecological consciousness in the Christian sense of losing the self in order to gain the self; “The Eternal One” (56), in which trees literally embody God’s care for creation; “Ever Greens” (57-59), which celebrates trees as separate entities, and digs deeper to articulate the notion of identity (Who-ness) as it applies to both human and nonhuman alike.

"Severn Creek Park" (55) embodies the dissolution of self to regain the self in an ecological consciousness, specifically describing the "human" position and both the longing and limitations that position entails, and suggesting that the healing is found in a reciprocal relationship with that which is perceived. It is also an excellent example of Avison's urban ecology; as so often, in this poem, she blurs the distinction between "pedigreed" and "fortuitous" to privilege the natural in all things. Here trees are "multiplicitous," like the environment itself, and "sky- / fingered"—a descriptive epithet that reiterates their link with the sky, with God's care for creation, and with light that stretches perception, all recurring themes in Avison's work. Sentience and subjectivity are suggested in all things around the poet, as the trees "sometimes / sigh" and the bench "warms itself," both literal physical descriptions with a hint of personification. She specifically identifies the human position and its fundamental longing for oneness with the environment:

> I, human, am heartsore from
> stretching to
> appropriate all that is
> lavished here
> until
> it   takes   me   in. I am
> rinsed free of all but
> eyes and
> branch-bowered heart.

This plays on the multiple meanings of the word "appropriate": not in this case to take possession of, but rather to perceive, to take in as a gift. The meaning is elaborated in the following lines, in the reciprocal agency of that which is perceived, with white spaces in the text suggesting the independent strength and energy of the process—"it   takes   me   in." Rather than appropriating, taking in the scene, she herself is appropriated, taken into it. This leads to an abandonment of the subject position hierarchy, the blurring of identity between seer and thing seen, in another recurring image: "I am / rinsed free of all but / eyes and / branch-bowered heart."

"Life?" (52-53) is another key poem of listening, down to its final words ("living and / listening"). It is a poem of being, lacking a dominant active verb, whose syntax is one of exclamation and reception;

>   Here! All in
> the same shivery

instant; every
tendril, thready root (or the ones
knuckled above ground),
creatures, feathered or

bald, or hugely hopeful towards
fur, or hairy; my
finger on this pen, too, each is
kept in being, in-
stant by instant.

This opening passage challenges the single subject I/eye in having multiple subjects and a single substantive predicate "is / kept in being," while the first sentence is indeed merely the ejaculation "Here!"; it portrays with immediacy the multiple layers and modes of existence together in the same moment of time and space. These lines evoke multiple subjectivities: of the feeling roots of trees in tendril and "thready root"; of creatures that cross various species divisions ("hugely hopeful towards / fur, or hairy"); of the poet's own finger on the pen. The repetition of the word "instant" underscores a moment of time, complex and multiple layers "in / the same shivery / instant," as "each is / kept in being, in- / stant by instant." Here and through the poem the subject position is invoked not as self but as being part of "a / community"; even the seemingly transcendent command "Go high somewhere and / behold" is only the better to see trees in their protective and animated role, with their "naturally pastoring shadows." It also reasserts the ecological perspective of listening, the awareness of the utterance of the non-human creation.

Earfuls of almost
inaudible sighs,
rustling, tiny
needle-fall: why do we
thump and murmur in, so?
Because we're creatures in a
community, all
alive to imitative
delight.

The speech of trees translates (and the "Earfuls" are not necessarily human) as "almost / inaudible sighs, / rustling, tiny / needle-fall"—there to fill our ears if we open them to hear. By contrast, humans ("we") "thump

and murmur in"; again, incomplete syntax, specifically hanging prepositions, suggests a generalized state of being. But even in this awkward noise humans are not judged or even separate: "we're creatures in a / community, all / alive to imitative / delight." The image of creaturely community—of all Creation given voice and sensibility as a part of being "alive," with the purpose of living to be "alive to imitative / delight"—suggests responsiveness, imitating the Creator in "delight," or delight born from expression and felt experience, that echoes in reciprocal relationship. The final lines conclude the poem with more incomplete syntax, a "then" freed from subsequent dependence in time:

> Let stillness gather down at last,
> then,
> steeped in the oceanic
> peacefulness of
> greens, of leafiness,
> of living and
> listening.

"Then" is followed by no clear subject or predicate, rather, with an appositional modifying phrase, "steeped…"; it is a celebration of being that completely dissolves conventional subject constructions in a tree-like "peacefulness of / greens, of leafiness" whose ongoing state is in the gerundive verb-noun activity of "living and / listening." This state "at last" succeeds human thumping and murmuring, but the hanging "then" holds it free of time and movement.

Similarly, in "Communal Care" (72), both perceiver and perceived are blended and equalized in the moment of perception, in shared anticipation of the future solstice and "new / sunlight":

> The last leaves, linen-
> pale but
> large, stir on a
> sapling's upper
> tremulous limb.
> Bare brambly shrubbery
> protects them from
> stinging November gusts.
> Solstice will come, new
> sunlight to
> finger sapling and shrub,
> invigorate observer and

observed. Each is absorbed
in this moving but usual
processional of *being.*

The title raises questions: Who is caring? What is the "community" implied? It suggests that "communal care" is shared by both poet and trees, who are themselves both subjects and objects of "care" by the future "new / sunlight." The notion of "care" (itself a multivalent term meaning cure, healing, responsibility, kindliness, and/or nurture) recurs through the collection, especially with reference to both sky and sun. Notable here too are the overtones of personification or sentience; "leaves…stir on a / sapling's upper / tremulous limb" (where we would expect "trembling").[9] The spring sunlight will "finger" and "invigorate" both poet and tree, "observer and / observed," ("finger" as both verb and noun is also a repeated image in this collection, associated with "playing" music, with intimate relationship, and with life force). Both observer and observed are equally "absorbed" in "this moving but usual / processional of *being*." In the shared moment of perception, the subjectivity of the poet is not represented in the first person (as "I") but occurs in the third person; "observer and / observed" are equal both perceptually and syntactically. The pun on "moving" suggests both the continuous movement in time that is the rhythm of natural life (hence "usual"), and something that is emotionally powerful. Note, too, that "processional" occurs where we would expect "process"; the human analytic term is transcended by an emotionally powerful, ongoing "communal" ritual. While the word might suggest action it is in fact the "processional of *being*"—italicized as both emphatic and technical term, the celebratory song of being, in which all creatures share.

"The Eternal One" (56) is another poem in which physical environmental fact and spiritual meaning blend, literally and figuratively, as trees enact God's care for creation; the image is based in both scientific fact and poetic vision. This is also a poem in which the dissolution of the subject self into the natural environment is key to healing and relationship. In earthly life, imaged as a pathway ("the dim way of being / between His timelessnesses"), trees play a "deep-bosomed," maternal role; they shelter "His nestlings"—a Biblical allusion to divine care for creatures in the Psalms and Gospels. As in "Two" ("Trees breathe for any / who breathe to live", *AN* 3, 165), here trees

raise soft domes, care
for the air. We breathe.
Underneath, when

stunned by sunmelt
their felt dimness is
shimmery rest.

The punctuation here alters the conventional meaning, focusing on environmental fact, but also challenging human centrality; the period separates their care from "We breathe" to show that trees care for all "the air," not merely the air breathed by humans. As elsewhere in the volume, the internal rhyme *care / air* emphasizes the point, encouraging the reader to find meaning through listening. Breathing is a fundamental fact of all ecological life as well as spiritual life, here represented as a gift given through the trees; "We breathe" is like saying "We are." The trees' "soft domes" are raised by natural growth; while the image suggests a city, it is a city of trees, in which humans are beneficiaries and perhaps citizens, but not the primary movers or viewers. Here too the human subject is syntactically blurred or dissolved as "Underneath, when / stunned by sunmelt / their felt dimness is / shimmery rest"; the subject of the sentence is not the human perceiver but the "felt dimness" of the trees, implicitly felt by any creature who experiences it, and "stunned" has no noun to modify, except the same "felt dimness." This erasing of the subject position, paradoxically, moves the poem's focus back to the inner self (the "unacknowledged / doubt" or "hedged memory" of the opening lines): the "shimmery rest" subsumes these elements in a fully open receptivity to "His / timeless largesse":

Unquestioning at last,
much, lost or unremembered,
murmurs peacefully
under His
timeless largesse.

The gift of the trees shades into the gift of God, "largesse" given from infinite plenty, and a moment in time finds its answer in timelessness.

In some of her poems Avison addresses directly the contemporary politics of environmentalism; here this is most notable in "Pilgrim" (29-31), which combines the Genesis moment with radical ecology, as the story of the Fall is woven into contemporary ecological crisis and debate. The opening verse alludes to the creation of land and sea, night and day, as occurring throughout the cosmos, and envisioned as a process of "greening":

As the Creator made
every orb and places
where they could roll, and every
ocean, each with its beaches and
promontories so there could be
land greening day by day,
at peace in the dark hours, He
saw that it was good.

As Judaeo-Christian tradition is incorporated into contemporary environmental perspectives (orb" is a term Avison uses elsewhere for earth as both domestic home and cosmic phenomenon), the idea of the Fall, or original sin, is interpreted in terms of the radical ecologists' question: why do humans exist at all, since they despoil creation? This break in harmony is embodied in a white space and break in the text:

Oh why
make man to make of them, and of
ourselves, a desert?

Avison elides the theology of the Fall with the degradation of the natural environment and of inner moral nature as well; original sin is both sin against our own nature and sin against the natural world, making of both "a desert."[10] She follows up with the Christian question of *felix culpa* or fortunate fall, by which human sin opened the way for divine redemption:

Has He prepared in
our spoiled world an avenue for
His coming?

That view is challenged by the many who say "Nonsense!" and by "Even some / ecologists, [who] although / intent on rueing and / restoring, are / shaken about human good intentions"; while ecologists have a redemptive mission to regret, repent, and renew, they run up against the limitations of fallen human nature, and are left only with a paradisal narrative of regret, "wistful, elegiac" for lost "loveliness." Her answer, if there is one, is suggested by the title: a "pilgrim" is one who travels, normally to a spiritual goal, at home yet not at home on this earth, in a deeply traditional concept of life as an earthly pilgrimage. Such a stance requires not a disengagement from the natural creation but rather

a breath-catching
simplicity, a
belief in a
purposive, no matter if
any-which-way ongoing, plus
intervals.

This fundamentally ecological belief in a "purposive…ongoing" is "breath-catching" in its "simplicity" but acknowledges the limitations of human knowledge. These limitations are, amusingly, underscored by the seemingly "irrelevant" parenthetical thought that bubbles up in the poem at this point "(Why / that oompah-oompah merry-go-round the / dizzied parent divines in its / sulphurous shiny yellows etc.?", which can be dismissed as an "irrelevant fantasy," a childlike personification of solar orbits, but for the possibility that it comes from "Some / impulse of new energy." Like the "rollicking orb" and the idea of "play" woven throughout this volume, it provides something to challenge the human-centred ecologists' narrative, and even, self-mockingly, the poet's own solemnity.

The poem then narrows down to the immediate task to be undertaken in the light of that faith in a purposive ongoing, evoking a seemingly post-human, dystopian landscape that encompasses both urban and rural environments, where one "plough[s]" through city detritus and "scuff[s]" through the remains of a farm:

This is
now, to do: plough through
up-ended chunks of paving, litter,
wrecked window-casings, then
scuff through the dust and
bristles of a
(once) farm.
That's hard.

The urgency of the task, and its difficulty, is re-created in poetic structure here ("This is…That's hard" bracket the lines describing the task), and the images suggest former human habitations on earth as well as, possibly, the constructed or cultivated modern self. It is an image which offers little hope for "rueing and / restoring." It is at this point that the poem focuses on the pilgrim, who "flounders on, / aware of them? Of Him? away / beyond the / thunderous silence of / the universe," in an environment beyond human perception, which does not answer back. It is another

"hard" task to trust in the purposive ongoing: "it's hard to / trust, now, in a trail, still up / ahead opening." Now the emphasis is on finding the path actively, through life on an earth, with a suggestion of various unknowns at the end of the created universe: "Will there / be basswood leafing out? Or will there even be / a dead-end at a / vast curtain?" As elsewhere in this collection, the theme of alpha and omega, beginning and ending of the created world is invoked, as the curtain image translates literally into an apocalypse (or revelation):

> The Hand may draw it back, no
> mechanism involved, on all
> the rolling spheres, even
> that outermost, all-embracing
> orb: foreverness

This image unites the temporal and eternal universe; the pilgrim's sense of ending is in fact an opening-out beyond time, as the rolling orbs of the opening lines are contained in an "all-embracing / orb" of "foreverness." Thus the notion of earthly ecology is expanded through this poem into the multiple orbs of the universe, and then beyond time itself into a purpose beyond human knowledge.

It is through this sense of ecological wholeness beyond human limitations that Avison engages pressing human issues: issues of human society, human social justice, the basis of human nature itself, defined and explored in relation to nonhuman nature and the larger picture of the environment. "Our? Kind" (38-50) is a startling long poem on the problem of human evil, exploring the nature of humanity, problematizing the division between human and non-human animal, and playing on the multiple meanings of "kind." As noted by Stan Dragland and Joan Eichner, editors of the volume, this poem "mattered tremendously to Margaret" and was originally conceived as the title poem. In a manuscript note, cited by the editors (*Listening* 80), Avison says she had hoped to "anchor [it] in the free flow and delicate touch and effective/creative power of Goodness, in creation's beginning…and ending????" Her understanding of it thus encapsulates many of the key themes of this collection, and the poem merits close attention.

The title itself plays with the implications of the term "kind": kin, family ("kind" as linked to the German word for children and family); species, human verus nonhuman distinction, as the poem queries what it is to be "human"; and kindness itself, explored in context of the ancient question of human evil. The question "our?" raises that of our own definition and

self-identity: can the evil dictator on trial for apparent war crimes be “our” kind? What about the parallel between his actions and that of the poet herself as a child? What makes “our” kind?

The poem is divided into sections, or movements, with subtitles; the opening section focuses on what appears to be a trial of a dictator for war crimes: crimes which themselves beg the question of what is human, both through the dehumanizing effect on his “operatives” and “victimizers,” who are “dull[ed] down” by the daily effect of this programmed violence, desensitized even to their own danger, and to a violence which reduces human death to “body-clumps” (39) which they can contemplate without “shrivel[ing]” themselves (making them corpse-like but undecaying). The poem will return to this theme of evil as seen through its rhizomatic and systemic effects, particularly in the “co-opting” of others. Through this poem the non-human environment and non-human animals provide both perspective and commentary on the problem of human evil. The second section, “Song from Swans,” continues the theme of death with the myth of the swan’s song at death, but rewrites it as literal swan song to be part of life. The swanherd, with his pastoral overtones, is limited in perception; their music is beyond his hearing (not that the swan has no voice, but that we do not hear the music). They honk a little in the morning (what swans literally sound like),

> But they are
> singers. Their far
> song, once in a
> poem read about, he,
> gruffly gentle with
> them, longs to
> one day hear.

The environment is perceiving as well as perceived, and beyond human perception, as seen in the description of the grass at dawn: “They will / lift their tiny / granular green uncapped / tops to see and / be seen, ‘way down below / eye level” (39-40). But even human limitation is acceptable in the context of a “car[ing]” natural cosmos:

> Meanwhile it is
> enough when the
> steam is off the
> skywide bowl over
> this earth, its hills,

its rivers running, its
creatures cared for; even over
human beings, in
familied swarms or the
loners, a few.

This vision of a "cared for" universe in which humans exist as one of the kinds of creatures cared for on the earth ("the skywide bowl" for a caring and protective ecosystem, an image used elsewhere in Avison, is "even over / human beings," whose "familied swarms" are almost animal-like) contrasts sharply to the depersonalized cruelty of the instrumentalized death system portrayed in the opening section. This passage revisits the notion of "kind" again—human kind, as a species; humans' "kin" or families—and this is "enough"; this is a relationship of "kind" and kindness that is sufficient for us and for all creatures. It is in this context that Avison introduces the idea of human exceptionalism, but not in terms that emphasize human superiority to animals, rather the reverse: "Humans alone must / shudder into morning / clothes, wrap up for / warmth" (40). It is a basic biological fact of "our kind" that humans lack body fur or feathers, but there are also overtones of the Genesis story, in which clothing and a more hostile climate are the results of the Fall; after the Fall God provided them with animal skins, sometimes seen as a marker of a changed and now disharmonious relationship.[11] "[M]orning / clothes" suggests a possible pun on "mourning," sadness for loss, but this is also the "morning" of new life, which is a blessing even with limited human awareness; humans are "unthinking, but / somehow, at this hour, blessed."

These thoughts (human-animal relationship; a caring natural environment; suggestion of Genesis) leads into the next idea, in which she reflects on human evil in her own self as a child, with an implicit comparison to the monster dictator. The classic tale of childish resentment, with overtones of Genesis (she eats a BC Delicious apple while "craftily" [41] tempting the neighbour child to get herself dirty), lives in her memory; it still "haunts" her "sleepless nights" as she remembers being "glad / when she went sobbing home. / I knew I had been bad, nor / to this day can I remember whether / she ever appeared to play again, thereafter." This opens the question of whether to "co-opt" others in the act would have made the childish "bad" into "evil," comparable to the dictator with his "operatives":

Would it have made my
badness *evil* to have
co-opted the ones I usually played with to

gang up on
her or any other
defenceless stranger in our street?
(*Listening* 42)

Structurally, then, instances of human evil, both catastrophic and seemingly trivial, are mediated through an intervening passage that outlines by contrast the "cared for" natural environment.

The following section (entitled "Are there human menaces…?") describes human evil in metaphors from the natural world. It reflects on the rhizomatic nature of human evil: how a figure like the global dictator does not physically commit the crime but gives the order, until the process becomes self-perpetuating. Even with attempts to uproot them through "A / single harrowing finger," weeds reproduce still more by being broken up and spread around: "How horrible to help / only by further / bedraggling some in- / fested barley field" with the result that its "silvery silk has been / all overshadowed by those / stubborn knotted spikes / of alien twitch-grass." As a feature of "our? kind" human evil is organic rather than constructed; no "military map" could predict these instances of human evil, no "cadre" stamp them out and no systematic approach "unsettle / raiders as ram- / paging as the Black / Death once was…" (43). The well-worn cultural memory of "Bring out your dead" is here given its full horror by being associated with the "new day", and "morning streets"; the earlier wisp of a pun on morning / mourning is more pointed.

Avison continues to explore the naturalness of human evil in the following passage, which presents the often-voiced point that animals kill only out of necessity, but raises the idea that there are the occasional "rogue[s]" which turn on their own kind: "Are these born fra- / tricidal?" The response to these animals is "some cull," and the question whether they, or the cull, are a "callous, or cruel, necessity of natural / ORDER?" The capitalization of the word suggests an ironic interpretation, as do the emotive moral qualifiers "callous" and "cruel" for the supposedly neutral term "necessity." This question is bracketed structurally by the temptation to "let / it happen?" and to "sit it out," stay home, shut it out, group together and pretend to be civilized ("calm-for-table company for one / another"), and shut out the question of human evil as if it was ringing the doorbell or phone—"Don't answer." But the poet's answer to that impulse is "No. Think" (44). As the animal example shows, there are consequences to inaction. Even with the apparently organic and unstoppable nature of human evil, rogues "must be / corralled" because they still inflict pain, victimize others; and the poem pauses to wonder why they are like this, per-

haps in a consideration of their childhood, perhaps with Biblical overtones "(Was pain their own / birthright?)" (44-45)

"Back in Court" focuses directly on the figure on trial, reconstructing his point of view and psychological outlook, with the control, contempt, and arrogance that are his "massive chainmail" (48) against both human and divine justice. The poem turns again to the opening theme of the "operatives" through whom he worked, and the willed insensibility that this system produces, as the soldiers shut out the memories of what they were "co-opted" into doing (and implicitly asks whether this is worse than the willed insensibility of those who "let / it happen"). It questions whether some are "beyond the pale," "Con- / sidered EVIL, when they / rally susceptibles who must serve as / their / implements" (47), in a parallel to her childhood memory – would her own "bad[ness]" have become "evil" had she gathered others to bully defenceless ones? In answer, while the monstrous pride of the dictator-criminal dismisses human judges and justice as "pathetic authority" (48) and "paltry 'precedent'," there is divine Justice, quoted as applicable to this scene: "'the / God of Jacob…keeps / truth for ever… / executes justice for / the oppressed'" (Ps. 146).

Like a camera zooming out, the section thus concludes with an absolute ideal of Justice, which, like the caring ecosystem, provides a larger alternative. While it leads into the final section, entitled "Solution, " (49-50), the poem shifts abruptly in tone, becoming both deeply domestic (in a familiar instance of urban nature) and whimsically cosmic, while suggesting a wider perspective of providential care in the cosmic ecosystem. Instead of evil dictators there are animal "crooks," "[m]ischievous raccoons," who challenge the division between the natural and the constructed in their ongoing battle with "city property-owners," "roof- / safe householders," and their human structures and designs, those "natural and / proud constructed challenges to / such as he." The "proud…challenges" and "such as he" convey overtones of the dictator's arrogance, but the quality of pride is assigned to both sides, as is the blame, should there be any. The solution is challenging as well: "This / calls for something more than / caging overnight." Human aims for the animal, human justice, would provide the raccoon with the forest environment where he can forage for "better food," but he returns nonetheless, to outwit new garbage can lids. The systematic solution is inadequate, ruefully commented upon with a touch of irony, in human conversational tones:

> New
> clamped-down lids appear to
> frustrate the marauder

for
a day or two. Don't
put it past him to
figure it out.
Hear that? He's back, trying
to dent the can that
rolls away after the swivelling
lid.
(*Listening* 49-50)

In this lighter yet implicit comparison to the problem of evil, the concluding question – "Who is in the lead? / animal? or man?" – turns out itself to be "the solution."

Relieved, one
falls back into a world of
roofed space, or away out
under the stars but in
darkness down among the
tall timbers.

The blurring of natural and constructed, the challenge embodied (and evidently preferred) by the raccoon, is both "solution" and relief, perhaps assurance that human will is not the only force in the world. "[R]oofed space" could be a domestic home (like that of the "roof-safe householders") or the cosmos, often portrayed in Avison as roofed (like the "sky-wide-bowl" earlier in the poem). Similarly, "away out / under the stars… in / darkness down among the / tall timbers" evokes both the expanse of the cosmos and the sheltering yet mysterious quality of a forest at night. Here the multiple conjunctions ("or" "but") and prepositions ('into" "away out" "under" "down among") break up spatial perspective in a "fall[ing] back" that could be vertiginous and terrifying but is, instead, comforting.

I will conclude this consideration of the pervasive and redemptive theme of environmentalism in *Listening* with two poems near the end of the collection in which this theme takes a specifically personal turn: "Soundings" (70-71), which links trees, art, and old age, and "A Sequel" (78), in which the poet whimsically parallels the life of a writer to that of a dandelion. In "Soundings" the experience of trees (both trees as experienced by the poet and trees in their own growing) is paralleled to that of art and that of old age, all three set out as an equal comparison at the poem's outset. The metaphor blurs into literal referent, and points three ways, in a summary, or exegesis, of the recurring theme of the branching heart. This

is also another poem of listening, encompassing vision and other senses in the act of hearing, as "soundings" refers to the technique using sound to measure, visualize, and create images.

> Art, and old
> age, and (clearly, in
> March) Toronto trees, are
> each peculiar
> root-systems, grappling
> the heavens to earth to
> make it secure. More-
> over, each in its own
> fashion fingers down
> deep underground, in-
> stinctively sure that nurture is
> hidden there in the dark.

As elsewhere in Avison, trees connect heaven and earth, in both literal biological fact (root systems drawing nourishment from underground, leaves drawing nourishment from sunlight), and in the symbolic perception of the poet; here the linking of heaven and earth in human life is paralleled to the biological life of the tree, in the process of both artistic vision and that of living itself, particularly in old age, which draws on memory as trees draw on roots. The next sentence, on memory—"*Treasure is what past living* must have *become*"—appears in italics, like a motto, but also contains the statement of faith and/or necessity: "treasure" is what memory *must* make of "past living"—in order for present living to be, fully? This image of experience as nourishment enables the liberating of perception, reaching beyond human limitations, as in the sky-touch of the tree:

> The balanced branching-out is out
> of sight? But art has
> eyes there too.

Like the "jail-break / And re-creation" of "Snow (*AN* 1.69)," the act of "balanced branching" is beyond ordinary sight, but is inhabited by the freed vision of art, which has "eyes there too"; like the branching heart, and the "eyes of God" that "glow, listening" in "March Morning" (*AN* 2.30), there is a synaesthetic perception and subjectivity located within that which is seen, beyond human physical sight.

The poem elaborates on "Toronto trees" as their own ecosystem and as participants in a larger ecosystem, drawing from "rooted toes exploring far

in / rainsoaked soil for ample / anchorage"; being so anchored enables them to loosen leaves "blowing / curtains of shadow summerseasons" in fall, the old age of their year. "Then seeds may be / made for passing birds," and runnels opened for insects' feet, that "waver up the / leeside of the massive trunk." Like the insect, in its felt experience, art is both vulnerable, receptive, and persistent: "Art has antennae always / in peril of pouncers, yet in- / domitably threading off into a / passing breeze." This otherness in perception has an active function in human life: "Art finds us / burrowing through our days, so / unroofs all usual places for / moments, irreversibly." While humans here are almost like small animals burrowing underground blindly "through our days," art takes off the safe roof, the conventions and expectations and channelled perception of our "usual places"; it does so in "moments" of perception, but the effect is irreversible—one can never go back to burrowing! Here art itself is the active principle; it "finds" us, rather than our venturing to find and create it. This moves to the title theme of volume, in an implicit shift from the act of active seeing ("The optic heart must venture") to the aural, quiet, receptive act of "listening" associated with old age:

> Old age excels
> in listening. Voices sound
> down the long corridors. This
> opens beyond an unforeseen
> gateway. To lift its
> magic latch takes quiet
> breathing. Curiosity is
> unexacting, but expects
> no less.

As in the venturing of the optic heart, here perception is extended into the unknown, but the artistic process is one of "breathing," being, and receptivity: to go through the "unforeseen / gateway" and "lift its / magic latch takes quiet / breathing." "Breathing" and being are powerful images associated with trees and the power of God elsewhere in Avison (see for example, again, "March Morning"— "Being – / easy as breathing") but here the breathing is "quiet," in the act of listening, in a poem where the felt experience of trees provides a model for both the artistic process and the act of being, of living, itself.

"Toronto trees," clearly specified here in the shared urban landscape, are celebrated for their variety, as they "display the full / gamut of greens." But it is the green leaves, which age and fall, not the trees, that are linked

to old age and the poet's vision, with a modulated reference to both the golden age and the changing colour: "These [greens], / not the trees, age / in gold."

In "A Sequel" (78) Avison steps outside the chronology of the volume to consider an overview of "a weed's life cycle," whimsically wishing that a writer's life could parallel it in productivity: from the springtime grass that "smiles sunward when / dandelions appear, small / suns themselves," to their "middle life" where their heads are "feathered in white . . . a more heart- / fingering little old friend," something "to remember when / the wind seeds dandelion progeny, / skyed, somewhere." From the word "paralleled" the metaphor is broken into two existing referents, both equally important: the life of the dandelion, and the life and influence of the writer, with the smiling suns and seeds scattered beyond knowledge gently evocative of the writer's work and life, and at the same time affirmative of the life of the "weeds." This is confirmed in the final verse, which creates a richly suggestive ending in all senses:

> Back in the crunchy grass
> the dandelion stems
> wine-making ingatherers make
> not least significant.

Here the faintly Biblical suggestion of the final harvest and the winepress points to the fullest moment of artistic production but also of life itself. It is an image which richly encapsulates the environmental, urban natural, and personal elements in the volume. And as the final verse of this collection of "last poems," which contain some of Avison's richest and finest writing, it is breathtaking in its fitness.

Notes

1 I have discussed this theme in detail in "`Our own little rollicking orb.'"

2 My adaptation of Buell's formula outlined in *Environmental Imagination*, which is cited in Scigaj 10 and Bryson 5-6.

3 Buell refers to this dissolving subjectivity as "porousness of ego boundaries," and describes it, variously, as an "embedded self" or "transpersonality," in discussing Whitman, Woolf, and Williams (*Writing for An Endangered World* 97, 107-108). Also apropos is a comment by Diana Relke on Marjorie Pickthall, whose poetry lacks the "I" centred vision of the male Romantic poets and is characterized rather by the "absorption of the poet in the landscapes" and the "emanation of poetic voice from nature itself" (*Greenworlds* 29).

4 Michael Hough is a Toronto architect, referred to by Buell (6, 9, cited in *Writing for An Endangered World* 87) in his distinction between the "pedigreed landscape" in the city and the "fortuitous landscape of naturalized urban plants and flooded places left after rain," in the context that urban planners should take the natural environment into account. The language here is Buell's. Buell describes Joyce's influence on Williams's "personification of his own city as a primordial couple of (female) landscape and (male) city" (*Writing for An Endangered World* 109). In early ecocriticism the gendered distinction between nature and culture is applied to rural vs urban themes in Canadian writing; see Sherrill Grace's essay on Atwood, Roy, and Laurence, in which she demonstrates how these three women writers reverse the traditional Western metaphor of city as female, with an urban-rural oppositional code that "designates the city as male in opposition to a female nature" (45). Work on urban ecology, however, tends to apply ecological models to human communities; see Kinkela's and Rowan's essays on Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson.

5 I have discussed this in detail in "`Our own little rollicking orb,'" 113-115, 131-136. It is worth re-quoting Avison's own comment on this idea in an interview not long after the publication of *Concrete and Wild Carrot*: ". . . the nature I know is here. 'Concrete and wild carrot' says it: it's the concrete of the city, and the wild carrot you can find by walking along mews and laneways or looking through the subway windows along the open cuts" ("A Conversation" 74). See also Merrett and Bowen, who both suggest that in Avison the landscape of the city, whether constructed or "natural," is suffused with sacramental power.

6 What is often ignored in discussions of White, however, is his account of the alternate "Franciscan" stewardship tradition, based in non-hierarchical respect and love for the nonhuman creation, as a part of Christian tradition and as a saving alternative that the West should cultivate.

7 I have discussed this element of self and other in relation to the Incarnation in Avison's environmental vision in "`Our own little rollicking orb'" as well as in "Word, I, and Other."

8 The difference between Rolle's work and the *Unknowing* is in the affirmation or negation of concrete images in the encounter with the divine.

9 A strong feature of the poems in this collection is Avison's precise, evocative use of assonance, especially alliteration, to awaken a "listening" response in the reader. We can see this in the opening lines "The last leaves, linen- / pale but / large" as well as the "bare brambly shrubbery," a vivid depiction of sight through sound. There are numerous other examples.

10 Early Reformed theology believed that the harmonious relationship with nature was damaged irreversibly by the Fall. See note 11 below.

11 Some Reformed theology in the seventeenth century saw violent relationships between animals, especially between humans and animals, as a direct result of the Fall. See Fudge 14, 37-38. This theme recurs through eighteenth-century and Romantic writing as well, notably in Cowper's *The Task*, Book VI.

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